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Abstract

Discusses the vowel systems of Quenya, Sindarin, Adunai, Hobbitish Westron, Khuzdul, and the Black Speech.

Quenti Lambardillion

A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

It is with serious reservations that we broach the subject of J.R.R. Tolkien's vowel structures in the various languages of Middle-earth. The complexity of phonetics as a discipline is sufficiently disturbing to most people that the subject is better left un-broached for that reason alone. In comparative terms, the simpler task would have been to discuss the consonantal system, mainly due to the fact that speakers of English are more at ease with consonants rather than vowels. This is probably attributable to the nature of written English which is essentially one-to-one between characters and sound in the consonants and an almost hopeless mass of confusion in the vowels. Add to this natural reluctance the "quaint" differences between British Received Pronunciation and the multiplicity of draws, twangs, and lilts of American dialects, the task quickly descends (or rises, depending on your training and predilections) into the arcane. The greatest audacity of all is to attempt to describe the vowel structures of six languages at once. The one saving grace in all of this is, however, that we will be considering primarily the "structure" of each vowel system; the vowels themselves will be treated only in passing (much to the dismay and irritation, I am sure, of my fellow arcanists).

The vowel systems of the six languages are not so easily arrived at as the consonantal systems. Quenya and Sindarin are somewhat explained in the trilogy and the vowels of the Khuzdul can be extrapolated from Tolkien's explanation of the Angerthas, but the vowels of Adunaic, Hobbitish Westron, and the Black Speech are not explicated and must be reconstructed. In order to represent these vowel systems in a consistent way, I have chosen to follow the IPA pattern of A.C. Gimson(1). Because Gimson is British, treats England's Received Pronunciation as standard, and implements the International Phonetic Alphabet as part of his methodology, his text and methodology are more compatible with Tolkien's than an American text and methodology would be. Also, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion in this article, two distinct bracketing symbols will be used to distinguish phonemic values and spelling. Characters placed between slashes, / /, indicate the phonemic value. Characters in quotes, " ", represent simple spelling.

The Middle-earth languages use vowels which are similar to but not identical with those used in American and British English. They cannot, however, be regarded as exact correlates. Although the vowels and diphthongs will be presented as being somewhat evenly distributed throughout the Grids which will be displayed, it should be understood that none of the vowels are plotted in the exact phonetic location of their articulation.

The articulatory locations and the representative Quenya words have been compiled from LR(2), The Road(3), "Tolkien's Pronunciation: Some Observations" by Laurence J. Krieg(4), and various references in Jim Allen's Introduction(5).

The vowels in Quenya, like many in Old and Middle English, are "long" by virtue of the length of time they

Grid 1 represents the vowels and diphthongs in Quenya.

GRID 1
Quenya Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i:/ si /i:/ valimar /u:/ yulmar		/u:/ enquentuva /u:/ surinen /ui/ luini
Half-Close	/e:/ ygni /eu/ leuca		/o/ romello /oi/ oiolosseo
Half-Open	/E/ surinen		/O/ vardo
Open		/ai/ aire /aure/ aure /a:/ tari /a/ an	

are pronounced and not because they differ from the "short" vowels in quality (this latter is the basic distinction between long and short vowels in modern English). Therefore, the "long" vowels are obtained by merely sounding the "short" vowels for a longer period of time. According to Tolkien, the only exceptions to this rule were the long "e" and "o" in Quenya. Both of these are tenser and slightly closer than the normal position. The normal vowels are /E/ and /O/; the closer and tenser long vowels are /e:/ and /o:/. Therefore, "were" would rhyme with "bare" (an acceptable British pronunciation) and "for" would rhyme with "war". (Laurence Krieg's transcription of Tolkien's recording of "Namarie" would indicate that, at least in Tolkien's pronunciation, the short "i" is /I/, but undoubtedly this is part of Tolkien's "accent" as a non-native speaker of Quenya (as ludicrous as that seems).) Anytime there is a following "r", it does not reduce the vowel. Tolkien says that "er", "ir", and "ur" are not to be pronounced like "fern", "fir", and "fur", but rather "air", "eer", and "oor"(6). In other words, the vowels for these three sequences are not /e:/, but /er/, /ir/, and /ur/ respectively.

The amazing thing to be observed about this system is its symmetry. The short close front and back vowels each have a reciprocating diphthong. The half-close front and back vowels have a diphthong which crosses to the other's close vowel. The open central vowel has two diphthongs, both ascending, one to the close front vowel and the other to the close back vowel.

The most obvious difference between Quenya and Sindarin is the loss of the kind of symmetry that Quenya possesses. The close vowels of Quenya, short and long, are in Sindarin differentiated by quality as well as quantity; the short vowels have become slightly centralized. The half-close long vowel of Quenya has lowered to the half open articulation so that the long and short vowels are now differentiated by quantity rather than quality. The short half-open back vowel has

Grid 2 represents a synthesis of Tolkien's commentaries on the Sindarin vowel system in LR and The Road(7), Jim Allen's and Bill Welden's observations in Introduction(8), and the index to S by Christopher Tolkien.

GRID 2
Sindarin Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i:/ <u>diriel</u> /i/ <u>gilthoniel</u> /y/ <u>ennyn</u>		/u:/ <u>urul</u> /u/ <u>ungol</u> /ui/ <u>fanuilos</u>
Half-Close	/ei/ <u>eithe</u>		/o:/ <u>onen</u> /oe/ <u>hithoeil</u> /o/ <u>gilthoniel</u>
Half-Open	/E:/ <u>elured</u> /E/ <u>elenath</u>		
Open		/ai/ <u>cair</u> /a:/ <u>daur</u> / <u>au</u> / /æ/ <u>aeron</u> /a:/ <u>fan</u> /a/ <u>palan</u>	

raised to /o/ in Sindarin, again producing a pair of half-close vowels distinguished by quantity. There is no difference between the long and short open central vowels as compared with Quenya; both sets are dependent upon quantity differentiation. It is with the diphthongs that the lack of symmetry is really apparent.

Tolkien explains that /y/ appears in Sindarin as the result of the coalescence of /eu/ and /iu/. /ai/ and /au/ are essentially the same as Quenya. The second element of /oi/ in Quenya has lowered to /e/ in Sindarin, producing /oe/. /æ/ and /ei/ are unique to Sindarin.

It is interesting that neither Quenya nor Sindarin have reduced vowels. All final vowels are pronounced at full value. Sindarin does have an "extra-long" option with monosyllables which is indicated graphemically by a circumflex over the vowel character.

The vowel system for Adunaic can only be gleaned from place and personal names. Assuming that the circumflex is indicative of long vowels (as Christopher Tolkien asserts in S(9), Grid 3 represents what can be known at present about the vowels.

GRID 3
Adunaic Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i:/ <u>ibal</u> /i/ <u>Gimilzor</u>		/u:/ <u>adunakhor</u> /u/ <u>agathurush</u>
Half-Close			/o:/ <u>sakalthor</u>
Half-Open	/E:/ <u>akallabeth</u> /E/ <u>Belzagar</u>		
Open		/as/ <u>Gimilkhad</u> /a/ <u>Kalab</u>	

There is a corresponding short vowel for all of the vowels in Adunaic except /oi/. For the sake of symmetry, it could be assumed that there is an /oi/, but there is

no evidence for it. Neither is there evidence for any diphthongs in Adunaic.

The vowel system for the Hobbitish form of Westron is scant, but orderly. Grid 4 displays the system.

GRID 4
Hobbitish Westron Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i:/ <u>Banazir</u> /i/ <u>Banakil</u>		/u:/ <u>mumak</u> /u/ <u>karigul</u>
Half-Close			/ou/ <u>hloth</u>
Half-Open	/ei/ <u>Belba</u>	/ʌ/ (butter) /ə/ (butter)	
Open		/ɑ/ <u>kali</u>	

The corpus indicates that there are long and short close vowels although there is nothing indicated about their quality. I have assumed here the standard. The half-close back vowel, the half-open front vowel, and open central vowel are short only. Tolkien's comment about the native Westron speaker's pronunciation of the long "e"'s in Elvish(10) has given rise to the two diphthongs /Ei/ and /ou/ on the Grid, although there are no examples of them in the corpus. Tolkien also indicates that Westron had two reduced centralized vowels, those found in the English pronunciation of "butter"(11).

Grid 5 contains all that is known about the vowel system of Khuzdul, the secret language of the Dwarves. This has been gleaned from place names, a few isolated words uttered by Gimli, and a comment or two by Tolkien himself.

GRID 5
Khuzdul Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i/ <u>kibil</u>		/u:/ <u>dum</u> /u/ <u>Baruk</u>
Half-Close			
Half-Open	/E:/ <u>ai menu</u> /E/ <u>khēled</u>	/ʌ/ (butter) /ə/ (butter)	
Open		/ɑ/ <u>ai menu</u> /ɑ/ <u>Baraz</u>	

The only long and short vowel pairs are the close-back and the half-open front. There is a short /i/ and short /E/. The reduced vowels, /ʌ/ and /ə/ are present, although there are no examples given. There is only one diphthong, /ai/.

As in Khuzdul, Black Speech has only two sets of long and short vowels, but instead of a half-open there is an open central set. There are also two other short vowels /i/ and /o/, but the short "o", as Tolkien indicates, is rare in Black Speech(12). There is only one diphthong, /ai/.

What, then, is the significance of all of this? Of what value is it to describe, albeit somewhat cursorily, the various languages and their vowel structures? What

Grid 6 represents a compilation of the known vowels and diphthongs of Black Speech.

GRID 6
Black Speech Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	/i/ gimbatur		/u:/ burz /u/ burzum
Half-Close			/o/ olog
Half-Open			
Open		/a:/ hai /a:/ ghash /a/ ash	

does this kind of an exercise do for our perception of Middle-earth or of Tolkien's craft itself? Certainly, it is interesting (for those of us who are still reading) to simply understand that there is more to the languages than mere "artiness", that a philologist is at work in a creative way. But "interesting" is a far cry from "significant" or "useful". If Tolkien is writing in the Traditional Fairy Tale mode (which he most assuredly is), the detail in speech patterns is justifiable even to the point of delineating contrasting vowel patterns in order to fill out racial and individual features. What is done in *The Hobbit* with dialects (Trolls, Gollum, Beorn, Dwarves, etc. are partially portrayed by their quoted dialogs) is done more subtly in the invented languages. The comparison is apt because "accent", in a great measure, determines dialect and particularly the historical development of dialect. By clearly demarcating the races in terms of their vowel pattern, Tolkien is informing us something about the relationship between those races and, perhaps, their hierarchy. The symmetry of Quenya must be meant to be aesthetically pleasing to a linguist who is continually confronted by "imperfect" natural languages which lack that beauty of structural form. The fragmentary or severely constrained vowel system of the Black Speech conveys to my mind, at least, the fragmentary and constrained society of Mordor. The emphasis on front vowels in Sindarin (and other languages) functions as another delineator, that between "light" and "dark". The Grey Elves yearned for the light of Westeros but did not achieve it. Their desire is reflected primarily in their diphthongs, pointing them phonetically toward the light. The major vowels of the language of Mordor are open and back, literally creating a Dark Speech in a vocalic sort of way. The other languages will stand a similar sort of analysis, particularly as they are related to the parameter-establishing languages.

Some may object to this sort of scrutinizing on the basis that Tolkien could not have had time nor energy to attend to such detail. Critics have asserted this before, but Tolkien's biographers and his own correspondence articulate again and again his compulsion for perfect detail. Whether we attribute this to plain hard work or innate literary and linguistic genius is of no matter—the product will bear either burden.

1. A. C. Gimson, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970).

2. *III*, 391-404

3. *The Road Goes Ever On*, 58-62

4. Jim Allen, *An Introduction to Elvish* (Hays: Bran's Head, 1978), 155-6.

5. Allen, op. cit.

6. *III*, p.394

7. *Road*, p.43

8. Allen, op.cit., 51-67

9. *S*, p.311

10. *III*, p.393

11. *III*, p.404

12. *III*, p.400



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Effective with the next issue all written submissions, including articles, letters, reviews, and columns, must be in one of three forms:

1. Typewritten submissions must be double spaced. Two copies should be submitted, including the original.
2. Computer-justified submissions need to be in columns 4 1/2" wide, single spaced, with a space between each paragraph. The original, rather than a xerox copy should be sent. They should be done on a daisy-wheel printer or a multi-pass dot-matrix printer. Dot-matrix printouts without descenders and ascenders on letters will not reproduce properly.
3. Submissions to Mythlore may be on 5-1/4" SSDD or DSDD floppies in either Osborne, Morrow, Xerox 820 or IBM (MS-DOS) formats, in both your word-processor format files and ASCII files prepared via the PIP [zf] option. Please include hard copy (use a fresh ribbon, please). All disks will be returned promptly, with additional public domain CP/M software of various sorts on them, if desired. (If anyone has a public-domain CP/M program for "foreign" discs, we would very much appreciate receiving a copy.) We hope to have a modem soon, for telephone transmission of articles. This form of submission saves Mythlore time and money, and, in effect, represents a much-appreciated contribution to the Society.

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